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Visual activism and social justice: using visual methods to make young people's complex lives visible across 'public' and 'private' spaces

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Abstract

Much critical social justice research, including work employing visual methods, focuses on young people's use of public spaces leaving domestic spaces relatively unexplored. Such research tacitly maintains modernist notions of the public/private distinction in which the private sphere is considered less relevant to concerns of social justice. However, UK crime and social justice policy has increasingly intervened in the home lives of the poorest British families. Further, such policies have been legitimated by drawing on (or not contesting) media imagery that constructs these family lives almost entirely negatively, obscuring their complexity. Drawing on childhood studies research, and a project that employed visual methods to explore belonging among young people in foster, kinship or residential care, this paper examines participants' often fragile efforts to find or forge places in which they could feel at 'home' and imagine a future. In so doing, it invites visual activists to reconsider their understanding of public and private spaces in order to contest prevalent unsympathetic policy representations of poorer young people's lives, to focus greater attention on their need for support, and to extend imaginations of their futures.

Keywords

Social justice, visual methods, young people, public/private spaces, visual activism

Introduction

Historically, the predominant focus in critical social policy research into young people's, as opposed to children's, lives has been the 'public' sphere as

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conventionally considered as outside of the 'private' sphere of the home. Important work has criticised negative political and media characterisations of, and punitive legislative responses to, disadvantaged young people's unsupervised presence and activities in public spaces (Goldson and Jamieson, 2002; Muncie, 2006). Influencing children's upbringing through institutions such as schools has also long been a policy concern. Increasingly, however, policy-makers in the UK and elsewhere have focused on young people's family lives (Binken and Blokland, 2012; Gillies, 2008). In particular, crime and social justice policy has explained anti-social and criminal behaviour almost exclusively as a product of incompetent parenting among poorer, 'troubled' families (Farrington, 1996; Levitas, 2012). Gillies (2008), Lareau (2011) and others have interrogated such predominantly negative characterisations of poorer families in the UK and USA respectively through qualitative studies. Other childhood studies researchers such as Holloway and Valentine (2000) have highlighted the inter-relationships between such young people's lesser access to comfortable and safe private spaces and their consequent attempts to create niches for themselves in ostensibly public spaces. However, the lived domestic experience of less privileged young people and their families has remained relatively absent from visual research. As such, visual sociologists have not helped to counter the prevalent political and media characterisations of such home lives as dysfunctional or

‘abject’ that, as Tyler (2013) argues, have contributed to the legitimisation of increasingly punitive criminal justice and social security sanctions.

Bringing together literature from across research boundaries, this paper discusses these issues in relation to a project that employed visual methods to explore constructions of (not) belonging among young people who have spent time in foster, kinship or residential care. Researcher analysis of the data produced by the participants suggested ways in which their fragile access to the broad range of indoors, outdoors, physical and less tangible spaces in which they felt ‘at home’ had affected their well-being, both in terms of their mental health and their sense of being able to imagine a positive future. At the same time, this paper also argues that participatory visual research can help to question prevalent negative public imaginations of abject, ‘troubled’ families. Such work is therefore ‘activist’ in its production and elicitation of data (including photos, videos, drawings) with the potential to influence not only social work practice but also to contest current representations of such young people’s lives and their futures. Equally importantly, it may also carry the potential to expand the imaginations young people hold of themselves, and researchers, of their practice.

Theoretical starting points

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In recent years, criminal justice and family policy-making in many countries has focused on disadvantaged families (Binken and Blokland, 2012; Gillies, 2008). In the UK, the New Labour¹ government (1997-2010) emphasised a 'parenting deficit' to be filled by advice and education rather than practical support, and pursued: 'an increasingly interventionist agenda ... in the name of promoting order and civil justice' (Gillies, 2008: 9). The political narrative of the subsequent Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010-2015) focused primarily on non-traditional families 'dependant' on social security and living in social housing, an approach that seems set to continue under the Conservative government elected in May 2015. In this narrative, poverty is presented as a matter of choice and low aspirations (Tyler, 2013: 167), while the Prime Minister (Cameron, 2008) has contended that British society is morally 'broken'. As Levitas (2012: 4) argues, the government's 'policy on social justice hinges on the claim that there are 120,000 'troubled families' in Britain' but 'in the term "troubled families"³ it deliberately conflates families experiencing multiple disadvantage and families that cause trouble' (2012:12). This 'moral' rhetoric further assumes little state responsibility for the socio-economic conditions in which families live. In this policy context, some aspects of traditional notions of family privacy have been increasingly abandoned, at least in relation to the poorest UK families. Furthermore, political and media representations of these families have contributed to an aesthetic in which such

groups are constructed as ‘national abjects’ (Tyler, 2013), and which has been employed to justify the further withdrawal of social assistance.

Much critical youth and criminal justice policy research has criticised the many UK policy initiatives that have associated young people’s presence in public spaces with anti-social behaviour and introduced authoritarian legislative responses (Goldson and Jamieson, 2002; Muncie, 2006). The increasing application of criminal justice-type assumptions and approaches to work with families has also been critiqued, notably in Gillies’ work (2011) on ‘competent parenting’. Some empirical childhood studies research in the UK has further highlighted the inter-connections between poorer young people’s presence in, and use of, public spaces and their relative lack of autonomy and agency in smaller, overcrowded homes (Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Skelton, 2000). Through exploring young people’s domestic experience, such work has also therefore tacitly criticised policy assumptions equating the unsupervised presence of young people in public spaces with anti-social attitudes or behaviour.

The potential importance of employing visual methods to explore the significance and accessibility of domestic and other ‘private’ spaces to young people living in more difficult circumstances was further highlighted for the first author by her

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research into the effects of parental substance misuse (PSM). This work identified how respondents' domestic sensory experience often conflicted with 'Anglo-European' norms of 'home' as a singular, quiet and exclusive space (Mallett, 2004), preventing them from feeling 'at home' where they lived. Many of these young people found the contrast between their own (unpredictable, noisy) experience and contemporary discourses that emphasise the need for a stable, tranquil, domestic life in order to establish a stable sense of self (Illouz, 2007), difficult to negotiate (Wilson et al., 2012a). In response, they employed music and the television to blank out unwanted sounds and to create a sense of warmth and security in bedrooms, or sought out such 'home-like' environments elsewhere (Wilson et al., 2012b). This work also suggested the importance of a range of physical and less tangible, including digital, spaces (Bloustien and Peters, 2011) to young people's negotiation of difficult circumstances.

The PSM research also highlighted the potential importance of employing the participatory, sensory methods (Pink, 2009; Rose, 2007) discussed in the next section to further explore and communicate such sensory dimensions of 'private', domestic experience. 'Sensory methods', which draw more directly on the senses of sight, sound, touch and smell rather than relying exclusively on speech, inevitably raise knotty ethical issues of privacy, confidentiality and of the possible further

pathologisation of difficult home circumstances. However, the authors considered that in spite of these complexities, such methods might help to re-focus attention on the needs and creativity of young people in difficult domestic circumstances rather than exclusively on their behaviour and experience outside of the home. Further, in their view, such methods might also help to challenge the abject social imagination of these young people's lives, while also furthering a more complex appreciation of their own spatial and sensory constructions of, and agency in relation to, 'home' spaces.

The following section will discuss the sensory methods employed in the project on which this paper draws.

Methodological background

This project⁴ was a qualitative study of the sensory and spatial construction of (not) belonging whether positive, negative or ambivalent with young people who, for various reasons, could not live with their biological parents. In the UK, such children are officially referred to as 'looked after' by local authorities.⁵ From 2011-2012 the authors worked with 22 white,⁶ predominantly working class, young people (13 men, 9 women) mostly aged between 14-17 (full range 10-23), recruited through voluntary sector and statutory social work agencies. Nine participants were from remote

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islands, five of them from rural island locations, and four from more urban environments. The remaining participants lived in Scotland's more densely populated 'Central Belt' area, of whom ten were from urban and three from rural communities. Several respondents spoke of close family connections to England, Ireland and, a few, to Southern Europe. Information relating to the ability and sexuality of the participants was not routinely collected, however one participant mentioned a genetic condition that embarrassed her, while a few had experienced mental health difficulties. One young man spoke of a same-sex relationship, while another considered himself to be 'bisexual'. At the time of the first interviews three participants were living independently having left care, 10 were living with foster carers, three with kinship carers, three in residential care, two in secure units and one had been adopted. However, several of the participants' living circumstances changed over the course of the project and all had experienced varied, and often successive, official living arrangements.

All the young people participated in the first interview and 14 completed a second interview. While all participants seemed genuinely to enjoy taking part and to want to complete the second interviews, several factors, notably the institutional requirements of schools and social welfare organisations (in all of the different location types) and the expense associated with travelling to remote islands

prevented this. In two of the island cases however, hybrid first and second interviews were completed with these complications in mind, and, as such, the potential variation in the sample characteristics between the two interviews was somewhat mitigated. Six young people also participated in producing their own films and music to disseminate project themes. Ethical advice and approval was received from a University ethics committee, and from several of the organisations through which we recruited.

Overall, the interviews were loosely-structured, largely participant-led and often long (1-4 hours). They were sometimes followed by walks to stations, cat rescue homes or social work offices, while contact with several respondents was maintained over time through multiple phone calls and texts. The second author engaged in additional conversations and observations to the interviews themselves over the two separate weeks she stayed in each of two island communities, and detailed field notes were kept throughout the process of data collection. All the interview discussions were fully transcribed, entered into NVIVO™ and analysed thematically (and independently) by both researchers, alongside the field notes, photos, sounds and drawings produced. Content analysis of the photos and drawings was also carried out, and interpretations of the data were discussed as a team.

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The interview methodology, for which the participants produced photos, sound recordings and drawings, was developed with the input of both authors, building upon their previous work (including Milne et al., 2012; Pearce and Milne, 2010; Wilson et al., 2012b), Wilson's secondary analysis (2014), and guidance from a project advisory group. Particularly influential here was a woman with experience of multiple different care arrangements in adolescence and subsequently of being a kinship carer. The first interviews were preceded by an introductory, interactive meeting in which potential participants were talked through the instructions for taking photos and recording sounds, and the ethical implications of taking pictures that might identify or incriminate themselves or others. They were also encouraged to play with the equipment provided (a digital camera and audio-recorder), to ask questions, and to consent (or not) to participation in the project and to differing uses of the data produced.

For the first interviews, participants were asked to take photos of their favourite and least favourite spaces (where they felt most and least 'at home'), three significant objects or 'things' and to record sounds that were important to them. Reflecting the literature on different types of physical and less tangible space, the instructions did not limit the participants to where they lived nor to conventional domestic or 'private' spaces. If participants did not want to, or could not take a photograph of a

particular place, they were asked to download an internet image to represent it, or this was done during the interview itself. The resulting visual and audial data collected by the respondents formed the basis for the first interview discussions. This data was revisited in the second interview discussions which also drew on music tracks chosen by the respondents on the basis that they contained messages they wanted others to hear, and on drawings, often completed during the interview itself, of their current and ideal living places. Reflecting an interesting extension of the methods proposed, participants often chose to discuss their music selections alongside the associated music video.

As Pink (2009) emphasises, the use of such methods is ‘multi-sensorial’ in that the use of a visual method, for example, does not imply that the data produced will primarily reflect visual experience, or, indeed, that sensory experience can be so divided. As Mason and Davies (2010) put it, it is important not to view visual data in an overly literal sense. Indeed, as Rose (2007: 238-9) argues, photos ‘carry flesh and blood’, encouraging talk that would not have been possible in their absence. Such sensory methods have often been employed alongside participatory and ethnographic approaches. Notably, Pink (2009: 9) advocates the use of participatory ‘practices’ that ‘seek to understand and engage with other people’s worlds through sharing activities, practices and inviting new forms of expression’. While we did not ‘do’ the

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activities identified alongside the participants in quite the manner advocated by Pink, it is however suggested that the process of downloading and looking at the data they produced lent a sense of non-threatening proximity and collective, creative endeavour to the interviews.

In the following sections it is argued that the sensory methods employed and data produced provided an insight into participants' attempts to create a sense of belonging across a broad range of spaces, some of which are conventionally considered 'private', and some 'public', thus suggesting a non-conventional articulation of these boundaries, at least to some degree. The discussion will draw particularly on first interview conversations around respondents' photographs of favourite places and objects, but also the less expected discussions of their selected music videos. Pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves will be used throughout.

Data analysis: constructing 'home' in fragile circumstances

The importance of constructing 'home' across multiple conventional and less conventional spaces

Participants' photographs of their favourite places elicited discussions of very diverse, and often multiple, spaces in which they felt 'at home'. These images also

highlighted the sensory and relational significance of these spaces to their feeling embedded within both more intimate, conventionally 'private' spaces and more 'public' environments.

Many participants' photos and related discussions reflected conventional and idealised notions of 'home' as a tranquil, static, bricks and mortar place of primary or exclusive residence (Mallett 2004). Respondents from across the sample discussed aspects of conventional living spaces in positive terms. Leah (20, adopted), like several others, discussed her living arrangements at length, focusing particularly on the elements of bright colour that she had introduced into her bedroom. Similarly, Jodie (15) showed photos of her current, very pink, bedroom in a children's unit. Several younger respondents also discussed images of small 'niches' inside and outside their homes where they could feel comfortably alone and safe. For example, Tiger (10, foster care), and Marissa (10, children's unit) both identified special garden places; Marissa recounted *'[m]y space is the shed outside.. it's really quiet and nobody thinks of looking for me there..sometimes I want to get away from it a bit'*. Such niches were important to her ambivalent sense of belonging in a children's unit, while, for Tiger, they reinforced a strong sense of security with his current foster carers after previous difficult experiences.

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Furthermore, many discussions of participants' photos of such favourite spaces and objects reflected more or less conventional ways of 'displaying family' (Finch, 2007). Photos of important people, often family members and former foster carers, recurred, as did other items associated with significant relationships, including teddies, (broken) clocks and a clan (family) crest. Teddy bears were often discussed, even by older respondents, as among the few material objects to have shared their journeys through multiple placements in the care system. For many, including Liz (12, foster care), her teddy was '*someone*' to talk to, and a source of cuddles and familiar smells. The visual methods employed therefore allowed for a complex understanding of the disparate elements contributing to young people's feelings of being more or less embedded within, or connected to, a particular and conventionally private and home-like environment or place, even after multiple moves.

The discussions of participants' photos were also critical to identifying and understanding the special biographical importance of objects and spaces, some of which, in contrast to those previously discussed, were not located where they officially lived. For example, Channel (17) took no photographs at her foster carer's house. Instead she focused on the colour scheme and objects in what she presented as her auntie's living room. However, subsequent discussion, prompted by these photos, revealed that the house and its contents provided numerous visual and sensual

reminders of her grandfather, whose house this had been until his recent death. Channel emphasised that this house had not changed over the years, providing a degree of stability that contrasted with her experience of multiple foster placements:

CH: It's never been changed... That's why I like it so much. Never, ever been changed.

SW: So this house has always been the same throughout your life?

CH: Aye.

Her attachment to this particular aesthetic was further suggested by her reproduction of significant elements of it, including the wallpaper, in her decoration of her friend Alannah's flat, which was where she spent most of her time. This similarity was not initially highlighted by Channel herself but was noted by the first author while examining and discussing her photos in the first interview. The identification and discussion of the similarity in decor between these two places, and understanding of its relational significance, was only made possible therefore through the use of visual methods and related conversations. As indicated in the exchange reproduced below, Channel's reaction to this perhaps unexpected observation on the part of the interviewer was slightly guarded or uncertain. Indeed, discussions of the images the participants took or selected prior to the interviews often prompted further, less anticipated reflections on half-remembered or part-realised biographical and other connections. This exchange suggests therefore that employing visual data may

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facilitate more dialogical interviewing; in contrast to conventional interviews entirely dependent on the verbal, the visual data seemed to provide something more concrete to which both parties could respond.

However, the significance of Channel's reproduction of the aesthetic of her grandfather's place in Alannah's flat, illustrated by the same exchange, did not relate only to her past. It also seemed to help provide a secure place for thinking about the future, a point underlined by Yuval-Davis (2011) as critical to a feeling of belonging. Channel's animated discussion of how she had decorated several rooms suggested her determination to create a comfortable home for herself, living as a family with Alannah and Alannah's son. This work seemed to reflect a means of investment in and building towards the future:

SW: So she let you choose the wallpaper?

CH: A-ha [uncertain]

SW: Did you choose the carpet as well?

CH: Me and Alannah

SW: A-ha. So her house is kind of like a ...project?

CH: Aye (laughs)

Reggie (23, living independently) discussed several photos of a corner of his mother's living room in somewhat similar, though less ambitious, terms. In his first

interview, he presented this corner as an almost conventional 'home' space. There was no bedroom for him in this house. However, he had created this live-able space combining a couch and a computer ('my everything') and emphasised that he felt 'like sort of furniture there'. At the same time, when necessary, he used headphones to protect himself from the surrounding 'insane busyness' of his brothers arguing with their girlfriends: *'I like the busyness and that I can be completely comfortable and no-one will hassle me!'*

Many participants then, through their photos and related discussions, presented places and objects which they associated with feeling 'at home' at least to some degree. At its strongest, this feeling seemed to be one of an unambivalent sense of belonging, associated with important relationships, and related to places over which they could exercise some control. For the older participants, including Reggie, Channel and Leah, this autonomy was associated with having keys or being able to separate themselves from others, or from noise, within the same environment without causing offence. Further, in some of these places, they could entertain some sense of carving out a future, in terms of decorating a family home (Channel), or of rebuilding family relationships and maintaining contact with friends and potential employers, as Reggie did through his computer 'corner'.

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Some of the spaces discussed therefore reflected elements of the conventional norms of 'home', as consisting of a relatively tranquil, single space. However some aspects of the places identified were less conventional. As noted, Reggie, Channel and others did not live where their most important home spaces were located. Further, Reggie's appreciation of the chaos at his mother's place perhaps also attested to his previous enjoyment of living in a bustling children's home, and consequent difficulty in coping with the silence and solitude of his own flat. In addition, some of the older participants highlighted networks of home places, incorporating some which resembled conventional norms, but also others, including mobile and outdoor places, that are not usually considered to be either 'private' or 'home-like'. For example, in addition to Alannah's and her aunt's houses, Channel identified a beach, her college, a caravan park and the bus that took her between all of these 'home' spaces, some of which were situated some distance apart. Similarly, in addition to his 'corner' and a friend's bedroom, Reggie included several photos of a specific park bench and an art gallery; Dylan (18, living independently) also emphasised his attachment to a local park, and took photos of a view of the hills beyond the flats that surrounded his own.

The participants' different sensory experiences in these less conventional 'home' places were emphasised. For Channel, the bus and beach were among the few places where she could let her emotions 'go':

I don't argue with anyone ... all my feelings just go 'whoo' ... away from my head. I feel relaxed when I'm on a bus.

CH: I go usually, to the beach. And then ... forget about things.

SW: What do you like about the beach?

CH: ... the quietness there... At night. The wind, the sky and everything.

Though she had not been to the beach in the week she had the camera, the photos she took on the bus seemed to communicate movement; she had turned the camera on its side and focused on the passing road left behind. Reggie felt safe on 'his' bench; one that was not too quiet or isolated, and from which he enjoyed the sights and sounds of other park-users' interactions and games at certain times. He also included two photos of moving water, emphasising that this was a sound he loved because it soothed him, while Dylan explained that his view of the hills lifted his often low spirits in the mornings.

Other less conventional 'spaces', identified by the participants through their discussions of photos of important objects, were more intangible. Books provided Marissa with a feeling of security and safety. She brought a photo of her bookshelf to her first interview, and her second interview drawing of her 'ideal' home included a whole library. Reggie brought a computer printout of a character from a video game

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to the first interview and described how he enjoyed the imaginative space the games afforded. Visual media and other artefacts, including those inscribed on participants' bodies, were also highlighted as providing safe spaces in which to engage with difficult historical and developing questions around personal history and identity. Reggie, for example, took several photos of his tattoos, including those he no longer liked, and explained their importance as constant reminders of his life history and personal development. Meanwhile Drab (12, children's unit) discussed an excerpt from a music video⁷ he had filmed himself watching for the project, in which a young boy looks in through a window at his dad's 'new' family and later vandalises the room of one of his dad's 'new' children. Drab's complex discussion of this video emphasised his right to feel anger at having been rejected by his father, but also that he had now moved on from, or learnt to cope with, these feelings, to a degree not recognised by others. As such, this track and associated video allowed him a safe, and even 'cool' and publicly-recognised space to explore and move on from difficult experiences.

Similarly, such resources also provided spaces in which to think about 'difficult', 'future-oriented' issues, including sexuality. For example, a few older respondents identified sexually ambiguous film excerpts, characters or singers they had come across through YouTubeTM as their music tracks. Daniel's (16, residential unit)

interview photographs included several of the posters and drawings of the singer Jessie J which adorned the walls of his room. He also spoke of his desire for a tattoo incorporating words from her song 'Laserlight'. For him, Jessie J provided an embodiment of someone at ease with her bisexuality: *'[her] being positive about her life and her fans makes me feel good about myself'*. Further, the interview process itself, perhaps reinforced by these methods, seemed to furnish a safe space for one participant first to express homophobic comments, before identifying himself as 'gay' at a subsequent meeting.

Overall, the methods employed may be seen to connect with a broader visual culture among the participants in which visual representations of, or interpreted in relation to, their own complex lives (whether in the form of tattoos or music videos) played an important role and provided material to think with. To some extent, this concern is also reflected in the care some participants took to take 'good' photos or to download images that precisely represented particular places and experiences.

The fragility of participants' access to 'home' spaces

Employing sensory methods to explore 'home' spaces, but without limiting that exploration to spaces associated with conventional Anglo-European norms of 'home', therefore pointed to complex, eclectic networks of spaces that were

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important to the participants. These were places in which they felt embedded or could use to explore difficult experiences, negotiate identities and imagine a future. These spaces, whether inside, outside, static, mobile, physical or virtual, cross-cut conventional divisions between the public and private spheres, and helped the participants to develop a sense, however tenuous or ambiguous at times, of getting by or belonging in the environments around them. However, the fragility of their access to such spaces as a result of various inter-acting factors, was also illustrated by this data. These factors included difficult relationships and social and institutional policies, as well as their lack of material resources and of legally enforceable rights to important places.

Access to public places and resources was dependent on various social and institutional policies. While Channel's bus travel in one local authority area remained subsidised, Reggie's was not, and, by the time of his second interview, funding cuts had also put paid to free internet access at the local gallery. Dylan was also worried that his treasured view would be blocked by the construction of yet more of the flats he disliked. Participants in the extremely windy and wet islands also discussed the inconsistent acceptance of their presence in spaces such as bus shelters in terms that echo much literature on intolerance towards young people in public spaces.

In addition, there was some sense that the importance of such spaces to these young people was not always appreciated by those caring for them, nor by society more broadly. Marissa recounted that a keyworker in her children's home often encouraged her to get rid of books as 'clutter'. Further, several respondents' accounts indicated their awareness of the negative tenor of many British media discussions of young people's use of digital spaces. Despite its importance to him, Reggie, like other 'gamer' participants, felt obliged to describe the online gaming community defensively as '*a weird way to socialise and a weird way to make links with people*'. Further, Drab's use of music videos suggested not only a frustration that expressions of anger at his personal history had been discouraged, but also highlighted the lack of culturally valued spaces for a more public expression or discussion of such difficult family histories in a political climate in which non-nuclear families are stigmatised. Here, such concerns around young people's social media use may also rejoin the broader stigmatisation- even abjectification of- non-nuclear, poorer families both in the current political climate, and more localised communities.

All of these difficulties of access to public spaces, and of the lack or denigration of certain cultural spaces were particularly acute for those participants, including Reggie and Dylan, who had moved out of care into sparsely furnished flats in public housing. After living in a bustling residential school, Dylan found living alone in an

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‘empty’ flat very difficult. He had tried to overcome this problem of silence and loneliness by playing loud music, by buying several pets and by attaching a bell to his cat’s neck to ensure an independent source of sound. However, he spent as much time as he could elsewhere, often at a friend’s house. Similarly, Reggie did not feel at home in his cold, empty, silent flat, far from his family and situated in streets known for violence and sex work:

I kinda hate [my flat] to be honest,... if I want to see anyone I’ve got to travel...I hate the quiet which is weird because quiet’s one of my favourite things ... but only in moderation and only when I choose it.

Advised not to leave the flat in case the local authority decided that he had made himself ‘intentionally homeless’ (and that it therefore had no legal duty to re-house him), Reggie recounted trying to make it feel more his own with a few decorations and music to fill the silence. However, he found it difficult to be creative or optimistic about the future in a space associated with bad memories (a broken relationship) and that he could not afford to heat, let alone instal access to the internet.

Unfortunately, participants’ access to those places in which they could feel ‘at home’ was also often affected by the fragility of their relationships. By the time of his

second interview, Reggie had argued with his mother and brothers and was only using his computer 'corner' in their place sporadically and at night while they were sleeping. Fortunately, he remained on good terms with a friend and spent much time in the latter's bedroom along with two other close friends. The contrast between Channel's first and second interviews was even starker. In the intervening period she had argued with both Alannah and her aunt and, consequently, was no longer visiting either of her most significant 'home' spaces, nor the beach close by. The significance of losing access to Alannah's flat, which had provided some sense of a future project, was suggested by her difficulty in thinking about how she might decorate the flat she would move into fairly imminently after leaving care. At this time, this formerly enthusiastic decorator could only suggest that she might paint the walls there white, 'maybe'.

The effects of these difficulties, with their roots in social and institutional policies, as well as the fragility of relationships, were severe. Channel, Dylan and Reggie all spoke of a great desire to form, or to remain in romantic relationships (however difficult), perhaps hoping to gain some sense of 'home' through the construction of a family-like relationship. Channel had ripped some of the wallpaper from her aunt's living room wall on her last visit in an attempt to hold onto a sliver of this place that had been so crucial to her sense of belonging somewhere. She was very pale at this

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time and had self-harmed. Reggie's mental health had also suffered. He mentioned having experienced 'freak outs' during which he had thrown some of his furniture out of the window. As a result, he seemed to have given up on the idea of finding a sense of belonging in particular places or possessions:

I've got no possessions....I can't keep a hold of things for too long. [...]

I think it's partly to do with the moveability... having too much just slows you down....if I had more stuff I'd have more reason to stay in the house, but that makes me uncomfortable.

He also took a photo of a travel bag as one of his most important items to highlight this 'moveability': *'My house so it is...I live out of that'*. From a Puritan or strict environmental perspective, such an approach might appear admirable. Here, however, it was accompanied by anxiety. As Miller (2008) suggests, in such circumstances Reggie's lack of attachment to possessions might rather be understood in terms of his fragile mental health and difficult sense of a lack of belonging.

Discussion

Coupled with an approach that did not limit participants to conventional constructions of 'public' and 'private' or 'home' spaces, the methods used in this project, highlighted the interest and significance of re-thinking conventional understandings of, and exploring spaces beyond those public spaces often associated

with critical social policy work, and indeed visual sociological work, on young people. Through these methods, the importance of a range of spaces in which young people felt at home, for reasons including the importance of biographical links and their inter-relationship with sensory experience, became visible. Further, as with Channel's decorating projects, conversations around the respondents' photos sometimes brought these connections into a clearer focus than at the time the photos were taken. The 'multisensorial' nature of photographs was also illustrated by those that captured or represented movement (Channel's bus pictures), smells (Liz's teddy bear) – or sounds (Reggie's photos of moving water). The significance of less tangible spaces associated with opportunities to cope with or explore difficult issues, was also highlighted by Marissa's attachment to books and Drab's use of music videos.

The participants' accounts thus reflected both conventional and less conventional understandings of home spaces and of the boundaries between public and private spheres. To some degree, photographs from respondents across the sample reflected an attachment to conventional norms of tranquil and private home spaces. Channel emphasised the importance of her autonomous access to her aunt/grandfather's house where she could be alone in a familiar, comfortable aesthetic. Marissa identified niches in her children's home where she could spend time quietly, safely and alone.

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While some of the outdoor spaces mentioned were associated with and reinforced their attachment to conventionally private places (Channel's beach was close to her aunt's house), and also reflected norms of tranquility, it was clear that respondents also felt 'at home' in places that are not conventionally considered 'private' such as buses and parks. Furthermore, some participants highlighted experiences in such places that conflicted with conventional spatial and sensory associations of homes. Reggie, for example, loved the 'chaos' at his mother's place, but 'hated' the silence of his own flat, while Dylan's difficult experience of solitude is reflected in his attachment of a bell to his cat's neck. As such, some accounts challenged conventional articulations of the public/ private boundary in ways that suggest the need for further exploration. Notably, Reggie's love of 'chaos' and noise in parks suggested a sense of security forged through his much happier experience of living in a children's unit than in a private family home. At the same time, some of the older participants' attempts to create a feeling of home in less usual circumstances might also reflect the fragility of their circumstances, and their attempts to mitigate the difficulty of living in places in which they did not feel they could belong or imagine a future.

In social policy or justice terms, these findings support a further emphasis in social work training and practice on the importance of understanding, preserving and

supporting access to places, objects and relationships of significance when planning placements for looked after young people. They also suggest the need to balance concerns about 'digital' risks with a greater understanding of the potential uses of online resources by young people when trying to build a sense of belonging in new, or very isolated, circumstances, or to think through difficult past experience. Most importantly, the fragility of many respondents' access to important spaces further suggests the importance of longer, more sustained support for recent careleavers⁸ to protect their mental health, as well as the inadvisability of policies that focus on the provision of barely-furnished, single occupant flats to young people leaving care.

In particular, the rawness of Dylan, Channel and Reggie's accounts of trying to live alone in alienating flats they hated, or of their loss of access to 'home' places, further pointed to a critical lack of a sense of belonging, within the places they lived and surrounding areas. Yuval-Davis has argued that a sense of belonging or feeling at home must 'include a notion of project or sense of hope for the future' (2011: 10). In contrast, here it is argued that at certain times, these participants' lack of a live-able home space deprived them of a solid base from which to imagine a (secure) future either in terms of their (private) relationships or their ambitions in the public sphere. Indeed, these participants' experience of their official living environments seemed to contribute, to some degree, to an internalisation of public discourses that stigmatise

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or ‘abjectify’ circumstances such as their own. Reggie’s desperation in throwing out some of his meagre possessions and Channel’s disarray on losing access to her most important places further reflected such hopelessness and the negative effects of such circumstances on their mental health.

Sensory methods have the potential therefore to make important issues of social justice, and the related, complex inter-penetration of spaces conventionally considered as public and private spaces therein, visible. These methods are not presented as a panacea. Participants may not always be able to access places they wish to photograph, and it is possible that, in some circumstances, the ‘concrete’ or ‘static’ dimension of photographs may block discussion of more fleeting or ethereal connections. The ethical complexities and sensitivities associated with adopting such methods must also be acknowledged, including the need for careful interpretation of data. In the absence of detailed interview discussion and careful dissemination, Drab’s music video, for example, might easily have reinforced the negative representations of angry, violent young people from difficult family circumstances criticised by Tyler (2013). In relation to research participants themselves, there is also a risk that, given the instability of many important relationships, photos of favourite places and objects may quickly be reduced to poignant and painful reminders of loss. As such, the uses to which such data is put requires careful

thought. However, there is further potential for this type of work to problematise negative imaginations of young people's current and future lives in media and policy discourse by restoring complexity to their discussion, if accompanied by sufficient contextualisation.⁹ Notably, the project also highlighted the young people's creativity in response to difficult environments not only to the researchers but also to the participants, who took pride in producing representative images. Further, the unexpected understandings generated within the resulting interview encounters challenged both participants' understandings of their own actions and environments and researchers' approaches to the phenomena under investigation. As such, this paper constitutes an invitation to visual activists to re-evaluate their perceptions of 'public' environments, to lengthen their lenses to incorporate domains conventionally considered 'private', and to consider employing methods highlighting the creativity of participants themselves when developing further research with young people.

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Endnotes

¹ 'New Labour' refers to the early 1990s re-structuring of the UK Labour Party under Tony Blair with the aim of 're-branding' the party and distancing it from its socialist roots.

³ The coalition's social justice policy ('Social Justice: transforming lives' (2012)) defines families as 'troubled' where five or more of seven 'characteristics' apply: that no parent in the family is in work; the family lives in overcrowded housing; no parent has any qualifications; the mother has mental health problems; at least one parent has a long-standing limiting illness or disability; the family has low income (below 60% of median income) and the family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items.

⁴ The project was entitled 'Young People Creating Belonging: spaces, sights and sounds'. For a full pdf of the project report and research findings and for a multi-media site presenting project photos, films, music and sounds, please see <http://www.researchunbound.org.uk/young-people-creating-belonging>

⁵ The term is employed for example in the *Children Act (1989) (England and Wales)* and the *Children (Scotland) Act (1995)*. The UK is not a federal state but certain powers have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament, and the Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies. 'Local authorities' is the term often used to denote the main level of government below the UK (Westminster) Parliament and devolved governments.

⁶ Although the ethnic composition of Scotland is changing, it is significantly less diverse than England and Wales. At the last census (2011) 96% of Scotland's population self-defined as 'white' (<http://www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Equality/Equalities/DataGrid/Ethnicity/EthPopMig>). Statistics for the population of 'looked after' children may suggest a similar ethnic composition with 90.3% defined as 'white', 6.5% as of 'unknown ethnic origin', 1.5% as of 'mixed ethnicity', 0.6% as 'Asian, Asian Scottish or Asian British', 0.7% as 'Black, Black Scottish or Black British', and 0.5% as from 'other ethnic groups' (<http://www.baaf.org.uk/res/statscotland>).

⁷ The video of this song (Professor Green's 'Read All About It') can be found at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=GB&v=-oLFC5Z_Ys&hl=en-GB

⁸ *The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014* extended the duration of support to some looked after young people in Scotland.

⁹ In addition to the website mentioned in endnote 4, project data has been presented in several forms, including as a multi-sensory installation, to various social work and housing practitioner and policy-maker workshops.